Executive Action: Hollywood Rediscovers Politics

by M. Robach

Some of the fans had early fled along the freeways or come by city bus, stretching their Social Security pennies for an event almost as old as Hollywood itself. John Wayne would be there. George Murphy. Pat O'Brien. And Jimmy Stewart. Cesar Romero. And Loretta Young. A gallery of squint-eyed, leather-tooled Western faces; bow-legged wranglers, gaunt Okies, Indians of the Talking Screen; generals and admirals, Marines, flyboys, ancient GI Joes; veiled forgotten heroines, gawkers and showbiz fringe folk. A solemn mass would swell the Church of the Blessed Sacrament on Sunset, and its buttresses would groan, battered by the organ, the choir and the Latin drone of the dead. John Ford had died, the Hollywood director, and the crush of people at his funeral Mass had gathered not to celebrate the man but the icons of celluloid he had left behind, an image of America that existed only in the projector's eye. On the screen.

It was to be expected that there were few young faces in the crowd; John Ford went back to the days of filmdom's infancy, to D. W. Griffith and scratchy, voiceless sagebrush reelers. His cinematic classics which followed were economical, technically standardized dream vehicles—clean, efficient, inexpensive 90-minute flivvers to carry a mass audience in safety and comfort to the fantasy and back. Except for a few films, such as the *Grapes of Wrath* and *The Informer,* Ford stayed away from social themes and unabashedly admitted preferring the legend to the fact. He manufactured heroes because it was "good for the country to have heroes." It was not good for the country to look at its more sobering reality.

As Hollywood's grand old man, Ford enjoyed the esteem and respect of America's power elite, a venerable national treasure, cherished and decorated by the White House and the Pentagon for his postwar services on the cultural front; his films were rarely in danger of colliding with the 1947 "Screen Guide" rules, which reactionary emigree Ayn Rand composed for the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals—among which were never to "smear" the Free Enterprise System, Industrialists, or Success. And it was for this that Richard Nixon, as custodian and ward of all three, came to honor John Ford at a Hollywood gala early this summer.

Yet by then Hollywood was no longer the film capital of old: Jane Fonda had been to North Vietnam; Marlon Brando had spurned the Academy Award in solidarity with the American Indian movement; the former wife of Donald Sutherland had been indicted for her involvement with the Black Panthers; and the memories of Hollywood's dark days of blacklists, loyalty oaths and congressional snoopers had faded. Richard Nixon, representing a moribund dynasty, had come to pay homage to a house inhabited by ghosts.

For Hollywood today is putting its feet back on a path which it previously walked at hazard. Social document films flourished briefly after World War II, before falling to the blade of Washington's Communist scare plow. One of the last of this type to be made was Herbert Biberman's 1954 *Salt of the Earth,* a film about the struggle of miners in New Mexico depicting the victory of the trade union, Chicano unity with the national workers' movement, and the emancipation of women. Howard Hughes, then the head of RKO, took a personal interest in seeing to it that the picture was not made in Hollywood. And when Biberman, one of the blacklisted Hollywood Ten, completed his film as an independent production in Mexico, the A.F. of L. Film Council succeeded in preventing its distribution across the country.

The ground for social realism lost since then has been difficult to regain, despite the loosening grip of the old movie bosses and the diminished power of the [illegible] period Hollywood films drifted rudderless between youth, sex and fad exploitation movies; then came *Easy Rider,* proving that an independent Hollywood production could set the box office jingling on a shoestring and a socially controversial theme. So did such acclaimed semi-documentary foreign films as *Battle of Algiers* and *Z.* Out of these cross-currents of cultural trends, Hollywood has begun to chart its own course back toward films of socially and politically relevant content; and from the thicket of themes offered by America's recent history alone, a group of Hollywood film makers has plucked one of the thorniest vines of all. *Executive Action,* starring Burt Lancaster and the late Robert Ryan, deals with the shooting on Dealey Plaza in Dallas; it is a film about a right-wing conspiracy to assassinate John Kennedy, echoing with haunting names and familiar speculation.

The idea to fill the holes of the Warren Commission Report with a celluloid enactment of the national suspicion could not have been possible without the preceding decade of change in America's political climate. The social and political malaise attending the fevers of Vietnam put the symptoms on a graph that could be plotted legibly; but it was the political misfortunes of Richard Nixon that put the shot in Hollywood's arm. Although plans for *Executive Action* had been laid well before Nixon's troubles began, *Executive Action* did not initially come straight off the ground. Ancestral fears of Hollywood's post-World War II inquisition still ran deep. Ed Lewis, executive producer of *Executive Action,* was told by one studio boss that making the film would hurt the country. But Watergate, says Gary Horowitz, the film's producer, made all the difference; suddenly the box office beckoned. National General has taken the film and is distributing it world-wide—in the year that coincidentally marks the tenth anniversary of JFK's assassination.

The Nixon of Watergate was no longer the Nixon who had earned his first spurs in Hollywood. And it is of specific irony that the trend, albeit hesitant, of such recent social documentary Hollywood films as George C. [illegible] upcoming *Execu-*

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